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PROBLEMS IN TEACHING

Our editor wants to know what is happening in our department of Spanish this year. If I must confess it, we began, at the very first, with a sad season of retrospection. Failures of other years, and half-vanquished difficulties haunted our classrooms—miserable ghosts that would not be downed. The untowardness of the human mind in general, together with the special untowardness of the portion found in southern California, furnished an inexhaustible topic of conversation wherever two of us were gathered together. Out of it all, finally, came a desperate determination to take up boldly the different problems confronting us. I cannot yet be sure that this desperation has put us on the royal road to Spanish; it is my intention merely to indicate the direction in which we are traveling, hoping that future and wiser contributors to *HISPANIA* will turn us about if we are straying into danger beset by-paths.

The first serpent we took by the tail—we are still in the process of transforming it into a staff—was that of pronunciation. While we have always stressed the oral-aural side of our work, we have never witnessed any real miracles in accent. Even with the opportunity our students have had to hear Spanish spoken as a mother tongue, they have not acquired a really native pronunciation, except in a few cases. This year we are taking time to insist in the very beginning that each student learn how to make *correctly*, that is, according to the best known authorities on phonetics, all the Spanish consonantal sounds and the most common sound of each vowel. Too much of our time, in former years, has been passed in correcting second, third, and fourth year students who had not received sufficient drill in pronunciation during the first months of their study. We are not unmindful of the fact, either, that the price of correct accent is eternal practice. The individual sounds in Spanish are not so difficult for our students as is the linking of the various words in thought groups and sentences. In my own teaching, I have found it necessary to explain again and again what I term the “Spanish word and sentence scheme” as contrasted with the English. Quite readily they grasp the notion of the English “norm,” the two syllable word with its accent on the first, the shutting up of the vowel between consonants, the changing position of

tongue and lips while the vowel is being pronounced. I frequently write on the board a list of English words of more than two syllables and have them pronounced as they are in England (Crowingshield, Burlingame, Worcester, etc.) Students are ready then to listen to a description of the Spanish norm, the syllable ending with its pure all important vowel, and beginning with the relatively unimportant consonant, the word with the natural penultimate accent. This is followed by the presentation of *sinalefa* and linking, and a discussion of the glottal stop so characteristic of English and so entirely absent from Spanish. Phases of these questions have to be taken up daily for some time; even then, there is probably some soul in my class so enslaved by English speech habits that he will never cease to gulp down the Spanish word at one opening of the jaws.

Aside from an unsatisfactory pronunciation, our students have been guilty of grave inaccuracy, both in speaking and writing. In looking over sets of department test papers, I find no ignorance of vocabulary, but most papers bear evidence of wrong habits of study. Undoubtedly students have been grasping the language too largely by words instead of *phrases*. The *word* is not, in either English or Spanish, the *unit of thought*. The phrase, or the sentence in some instances, with its several words expresses *one* idea, and this idea should be grasped as a whole; for in many cases, the meaning of the group of words in no way corresponds with the etymological sense of the various members composing the phrases. Difficulty with prepositions would disappear in language study if the "word" habit could be shaken. The Spanish point of view is more easily comprehended by one who learns *phrases*, while the *hybrid* sentence (Spanish words with Anglo-Saxon idioms) is not often found in his speech.

Inaccuracy has been encouraged through the necessity of covering a great amount of ground, introducing new problems, new constructions, before the old were half assimilated. Right habits of study are developed only by means of intensive study. I have come to question seriously the value of the extensive type of work so common everywhere. Our teachers, for the most part, present every new phrase and sentence to the class before a lesson involving the use of this material is assigned. Considerable repetition of the phrases, explanations of the differences between the Spanish and the English idiom, translation into English—all of this is done at the

first presentation of the new lesson. The student is not left to the mercies of a "vocabulary" for the meaning of a word, nor to his imagination for its pronunciation. His home study in Spanish is very much like his home study in music; it is the repetition aloud for an hour of all the phrases and sentences in his lesson, followed by changes in tense, mode, person and number, as well as the formation of new sentences through new phrase combinations. The first lesson in one widely used beginning text in Spanish presents a possibility of about four thousand good sentences.

One of my students (in beginning French) handed in to me two thousand two hundred fifty perfect sentences which she had prepared for home practice after the *first lesson* in the text book. She had not even then exhausted the possibilities of the lesson, for another student formed a thousand more by using a phrase overlooked by the first student. It requires some time to repeat aloud two thousand sentences in Spanish, but not so long as one might think. After such drilling is done, the student knows fairly well the phrases of one lesson, well enough at least, to express the ideas furnished him fluently, and to recognize them when expressed by his teacher. Sometimes I have woven the possible combinations into a little story (often absurd in plot, it is true) which I relate to the class as rapidly as I can speak. They are delighted to feel that they are understanding connected speech so early in their study. After a few lessons the phrase vocabulary becomes almost unlimited, but the student has formed the right notion about what to do with a new paragraph of Spanish and needs less drilling by the teacher on each new phrase. The very slow student and the lazy one are unsolved problems with us. Private instruction outside of class is the only solution I can suggest for the first; but as our teachers have all they can do with regular class teaching and hundreds of papers, I cannot see much help ahead for the slow student. The second class we have with us always and in fairly large numbers. We fail the full quota allowed the department and as many more of these as we dare, without fully meeting the situation.

As a review lesson we have sometimes had oral contests among the classes. A list of English sentences based on a given number of lessons and prepared by all the teachers concerned is given to each class orally. The English sentence is said but *once* by the instructor; the first student in a row puts it instantly into Spanish. If he fails in any particular the student behind him gives the sentence, and so on

around the class. A long enough list has been prepared that sentences must be given very rapidly in order to cover the test. Each time a student misses a sentence the instructor makes a mark, on the board, against the class. This contest has always been a very interesting one to my classes, both in Spanish and in French, and has helped many a slow or lazy student to gain fluency in speaking. Very young students like to stand up for it, as in the old-fashioned spelling match. One of its great advantages educationally is that it teaches students to hear accurately the English sentence and to think out quickly the whole thing in the foreign tongue.

Inter-class written contests have been tried with first-year students. The teachers of first year work take turns in preparing an English composition that will require the average student a recitation period—an hour with us—to put into Spanish. This paper never contains a phrase that the class has not met, but it is long enough to require very rapid thinking and writing.

We have but little time in class for reading; personally I do not think we are in great need of it. The constant repetition of phrases and sentences with proper foreign intonation enables the student to read a paragraph or a page very well. We do have, at times, however, real reading-lessons. One teacher obtained rather remarkable results in reading by assigning for sometime only a paragraph of review Spanish for a day's lesson. He called in, upon different days, college students from Central America and Mexico who stood before the class and, sentence by sentence, drilled the students in concert. One day I took this teacher's class and had a chance to test for myself the ability of every student to read Spanish. I was delighted and surprised at what had been accomplished, for the class was composed of high school boys and girls of only mediocre ability.

Practice in silent reading for the sense alone must be done outside of class. I have always required a certain amount of this outside reading from second-year students, assigning the books from those placed in our library for that purpose. The testing of this reading may be done in a number of ways. One year each student handed in to me a note-book containing the translation into English of every sentence with a subjunctive in the book he had read. Another time I required a résumé of the book in Spanish. Generally I make an appointment with each student outside of class hours to examine him by means of questions on the book. When I first began the outside reading work I did not expect much in the way

of results, but each year I find there are always some students who become really interested in reading for themselves. In some cases they have read several times as much as I have assigned. I keep in my room a small table for a dictionary and foreign magazines. Students who read from this table are given extra credit. In order to encourage this reading, I have sometimes stopped during a recitation in Spanish to help a student at this table translate a difficult passage in French.

Rapid reading is done also in classes using a newspaper. We are having little newspaper work at present, owing to our strenuous campaign for accuracy and good pronunciation, which is occupying our time completely. I had, several years ago, a second year class that did fine work with a Spanish weekly paper. Each student subscribed for the paper, and each chose the section he wanted to report upon to the class. He told in his own Spanish the news of his section, keeping in a scrap-book the clippings from which he had obtained his material. The scrap-books were all kept on a shelf in the classroom and any student had access to them at any time. After a student had reported for a few weeks upon a section, ("sports," for example) he was assigned to a different section. This work required two days a week, although occasionally something was found in the paper that could be used as a regular lesson. Once it was the Spanish text of the President's message to Congress. The class committed most of it to memory and then discussed it with great gravity at a club meeting.

The capital problem confronting the teacher of today cannot be solved entirely by method, system, or device in Spanish, for it involves general method in all school work and is to be laid at the door of the department of Education. I refer to the decided trend away from training of the memory. Students do, it is true, retain, in the face of the modern educator's antipathy towards memory work, a few bits of useful information, even if no two students hold on to the same bit. Does not this prove that memory is not wholly atrophied, and might become, in the course of development, a really useful faculty, whatever the latest decision of psychology on the subject may be? One superintendent was approached about the matter, and after hearing of the needs of the language student, recommended that some real training in memory be undertaken by the teachers of lower grades.

Closely related to this question and springing from the same

source is that of propaganda against Spanish. A large university in recent times, sent out an educational expert to determine the value of Spanish, along with other subjects, in a certain school. This expert decided that the people's money was being wasted in a large measure through the teaching of Spanish and French as living languages. Although he was, as far as could be ascertained, ignorant of Spanish and of its value to the people of that community, he suggested a course of study for the school, a course by which not even the most linguistically inclined individual would ever learn Spanish. The subject could not have survived more than six months under the expert's system. Teachers in that city rose en masse and by dint of intelligent and unified effort secured vital modifications in the plans. Not all their zeal, though, has been sufficient to counteract the harm done by their distinguished visitor. Such a problem will have to be solved by the language departments of our universities and colleges. The institution from which the above mentioned educational expert hailed boasts of an unusually large and fine department of Spanish. If our Spanish-American neighbors would suddenly decide not to teach English henceforth as a living language the case would be parallel to the proposed language program of our visitor. Let us hope that Hispanists will present their claims so clearly and forcibly and unceasingly to their colleagues in Education as to convince them of the value of Spanish to the American Citizen.

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